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FINAL EDITION

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CLASSICAL MUSIC REVIEW

Nielsen, that's who

Little-known symphonist gets great hearing

ARTHUR KAPTAINIS
GAZETTE MUSIC CRITIC

Carl Nielsen probably remains Carl Who to the majority of Montreal Symphony Orchestra subscribers. The turn-of-the-20th-century Danish symphonist deserves more hearings than he gets, and he got a great one one last night in Place des Arts under the baton of Jacques Lacombe.

The work was the Symphony No. 3, nicknamed Sinfonia espansiva not on account of its length (a modest 40 minutes) but its satisfying balance of brilliant soaring and warm, human values. There is an optimism at the heart of Nielsen, an optimism arguably as complex and fascinating as the grandeur of Sibelius or the neurosis of Mahler. It is not a bad thing to experience in the middle of January.

Lacombe got all the particulars just right – the unison hammerstrokes at the start, the touches of waltz and song, the nature imagery of Andante pastorale, the pomp and humor of the finale. String chorales were striking in their intensity. Trumpets sounded handsome under the associate principal and the horn section (including two strangers) was solid. With vivid timpani work and high spirits from the woodwinds, this performance sounded MPS-ready.

There were, in fact, Radio-Canada microphones on stage, but the network was interested only in the world premiere of Passage à l'aube, a 26-minute exercise in busy atonality by François Morel. Soon to turn 80, this Quebec City modernist remains true to his 20th-century roots – or, to put it more bluntly, has not changed a bit. Lots of pluck-pluck from the strings dum-de-dum from the marimba. Who needs it?

The standard repertoire was represented by Sibelius's Violin Concerto. Euphonem Sarah Chang played it with with forceful tone, rugged passion and not-quite-impeccable technique. One sensed that her expressive strategy was the make the red-blooded score sound difficult. Which, I suppose, it is.

Anyway, with dramatic accompaniment from Lacombe and company, the performance produced its scalp-tingling moments. There is a repeat tomorrow.

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FRANCOPHONE MUSIC JUAN RODRIGUEZ

Television channel MusiquePlus not only gives fans their fix of video clips, it's also helped bring about a shift in which groups get their attention, aiding in the rise of Quebec acts

An eyeful of the music scene

The kid in Patrick Binette, program director of TV channel MusiquePlus, offers a shy smile as he recalls his childhood ritual of watching videos on weekends with friends, when there weren't that many videos to watch.

"The only music around was Top 40 radio, which had very little choice. MusiquePlus (now in its 19th year) didn't exist then, but one of the network TV stations had La Nuit des Vidéos a couple of times a year, airing from midnight to 6 a.m. So we'd go to bed at 8 and get up at midnight and trip all night long to see as many clips as possible, sort of like a rock 'n' roll pyjama party. Everything was mixed together – from AC/DC to Duran Duran, from Michael Jackson to Simple Minds to the Ramones."

These days Binette – at 30, having spent the last 15 years in the music business – goes through upwards of 100 new video-clips per week.

One of his missions, he says, is to promote the local music scene, which has exploded in the last few years with both French and English acts (from Les Trois Accords to the Arcade Fire). The job comes naturally to Binette, who worked in a video production house and as a salesman for music retailer HMV before toiling for companies like A&M Records and, most recently, corporate giant Universal Music Group.

"I was into cinema at first but soon discovered that music was 'plus cool,'" he says. He remembers his first stint at MusiquePlus in 1996, as a production assistant, when there wasn't much local music to shoot. "It wasn't necessarily cool to get into francophone music, because it was mainly mainstream pop, nothing interesting. I listened to Sisters of Mercy and Depeche Mode. I wanted to work in media so I could get fans to discover new music from here."

If fans now revel in a plethora of exciting local acts, there was a time – a short decade ago – when the only pop revolutionary was Jean Leloup. Why the big change today?

"Radio concentrates on format, so a lot of styles of music get ignored. This forced artists to organize themselves on the Internet and blogs and work directly with the CEGEPs and clubs and bars on St. Laurent Blvd., like the Casa del Popolo. Technology changed everything, because groups could do it themselves." In this regard, Les Cowboys Fringants pioneered this new paradigm of media exposure. And when Les Trois Accords arrived, MusiquePlus was ready to support them with airplay and promotion (resulting in 150,000 sales of their debut CD).

Moreover, Binette says, there was an unlikely influence on local progressive musical forces: the much-maligned (by intellectuals) Star Académie.

"People knock the Star Académie phenomenon, but it has made a lot of people interested in francophone music. It opened up minds that might have been closed to anything that didn't come from England or the U.S. Kids of 9, 10, 11 see people their own age interested in music, so when their tastes become a little more personal their reflex will be to discover more francophone music, from Anik Jean to Malajube, instead of looking elsewhere.

"Francophone artists had always been a little isolated in this anglo world. But now the hands coming up arrive with very large musical baggage. If we listen to Arcade Fire or Malajube or Karkoff Orchestra, it seems these groups have been listening to the last 50 years of music, yet they're in their 20s. With the Internet we can dial up BBC to hear what's going on in England and it brings things together here."

Deciding who gets played on MusiquePlus – aimed at viewers from 12 to 34 – can, Binette says, "tears me apart a bit. Sure, every label wants their clip played, but we feel more pressure within ourselves to do the best possible job. If we have five hours a day (devoted only to videos), we might have 10 clips per hour and 50 per day. It's difficult because you can't play them just once. You need 50 or so airings over two months to have an impact.

"I'm lucky because my boss (MusiquePlus founder Pierre Marchand) lets me decide 'au feeling.' If me and my team see a video we trip on, it's not important whether radio plays it or not."

Some clips that arrive at the MusiquePlus storefront studio on the corner of Bleury and Ste. Catherine Sts. have the look of "a wedding video," admits Binette. But the comparatively tiny budgets of local artists often translate into more creative ideas.

"Instead of big flashes of light and explosions of cars (like U.S. videos), they find different concepts. For example, take the hip-hop group Cat Burglar. They filmed about 20 hours from their tour and then spent several hundreds of hours on their computers working just on the colours to produce a comic-strip look. They did this with practically no budget but they were very creative. It's this artistic side that we'd like to reward."

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COURTESY OF MUSIQUEPLUS

Program director Patrick Binette, selects video clips he can trip on.

It's plugged in to the election, too

MusiquePlus looks at election issues that concern young voters, 18 to 25 years old, during a pre-election special, Vote Plus, Saturday at 4 p.m. with re-broadcasts Sunday at 3:30 p.m. and Monday at 5 p.m.

The special, hosted by Rebecca Makonnen and Nicolas Tittley, features interviews with university students about their concerns leading up to Monday's federal vote as well as interviews with artists about why it is important to vote. The hosts also talk with political candidates and federal party leaders including NDP leader Jack Layton and Bloc Québécois leader Gilles Duceppe.

KATHRYN GREENAWAY

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FORUM 22

MRS HENDERSON PRESENTS (G) 2:25, 5:10, 7:40, 10:10
TRANSAMERICA (16+) 2:10, 5:00, 7:20, 10:00
GRANDMA'S BOY (13+) 1:45, 5:15, 7:25, 9:55
CASANOVA (G) 1:40, 4:25, 7:15, 9:50
THE PRODUCERS (G) 1:20, 4:20, 7:20, 10:20
RUMOR HAS IT (G) Wed 2:20, 4:40, 7:10, 9:35 Thr 2:20, 4:40, 10:20
MUNICH (18+) 1:00, 2:00, 4:30, 5:30, 8:00, 9:00
BROKEBACK MOUNTAIN (18+) 1:30, 3:30, 4:00, 5:30, 8:00, 10:30
CAPOTE (18+) 2:15, 4:55, 7:35, 10:20
THE FAMILY STONE (G) 2:25, 5:00, 7:45, 10:15
MERRY CHRISTMAS (ENGLISH SUBTITLES) (G) 4:40, 10:15
MEMOIRS OF A GEISHA (G) Wed 1:00, 2:00, 4:00, 5:00, 8:15, 10:15 Thr 1:00, 2:00, 4:00, 5:00, 7:15, 8:15, 10:25
BREAKFAST ON PLUTO (13+) 1:00, 4:00, 7:00, 10:00
MAURICE RICHARD (ENGLISH SUBTITLES) (G) 1:00, 7:20
LIVE & BECOME (ENGLISH SUBTITLES) (G) 12:50, 4:10, 7:30, 10:20
WALK THE LINE (G) 1:10, 4:15, 7:15, 10:15
PRIDE & PREJUDICE (G) Wed 1:10, 4:15, 9:55 Thr 1:10, 4:15, 7:00, 9:55
WATER (ENGLISH SUBTITLES) (G) 1:40, 4:35, 7:10, 10:05
GOOD NIGHT, AND GOOD LUCK (G) 2:15, 4:35, 7:25, 9:45
BALLETS RUSSES (NR-NOT RATED) 1:20, 4:15, 7:00, 9:45

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